



Denver Post

editorial

Rico: Make nice with EPA

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In southwest Colorado, an abandoned silver mine has spewed toxins into the Dolores River for six years. Understandably, residents of Rico (the mine's tunnel is on the town's northern edge) want the mess fixed. But now that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is looking at the problem, locals residents fear the feds will use too heavy a regulatory hammer.

The EPA needs to let locals know what the potential problems are and why the agency is looking for possible pollutants in nearby soils as well as in the river. Rico's town government, in turn, needs to get its priorities straight.

Rico asked the EPA to restart a water treatment plant at the mouth of the polluted mine. The mine's former owners abandoned the plant in 1996; the EPA sued them in 1999. As the court case has dragged on, the mine has continued to pollute the Dolores River. The delay is unacceptable. The EPA should get the treatment plant working first, then fret about who pays the bill later.

Environmental agencies know that abandoned mines not only pollute waterways but also the surrounding landscape. So it was not unusual for the EPA's technical staff to want to sample the streets and residential areas for other possible old mining hazards, such as arsenic and lead.

But last week, Rico's Town Board voted to deny the EPA permission to sample streets for contaminants. The vote seemed obtuse, even ignorant. Refusing to cooperate with the EPA won't make the potential problems go away.

The board fears that if the EPA declares part of Rico a Superfund site, property values will fall and any chance the little community has of an economic revival will wither. Unlike Colorado's burgeoning mountain towns, sleepy Rico's main problem with growth is that it doesn't have any.

What Rico wants to avoid is the sort of prolonged uncertainty and disruptions that accompanied EPA cleanups of old mining hazards near Leadville and Aspen. Those projects took more than a decade.

Nonetheless, the EPA's priority in Rico must be protecting human health and the environment. Adequate environmental tests must be done. Only then can reasonable solutions be determined.

The EPA should, however, look for options short of a full-fledged Superfund designation if that's what Rico residents want. On Red Mountain Pass, for example, the EPA and state agencies crafted a deal with Denver-based Newmont Mining to clean up the old Idarado mine. The project now is a model of reclamation and cooperation.

The EPA should explain to Rico residents that invoking a federal law - the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act - doesn't mean automatic Superfund designation. CERCLA did more than create Superfund. It also gave the EPA legal clout to conduct emergency cleanups. And emergency action is what Rico needs.

Meanwhile, it's unwise for Rico's Town Board to bury its collective head in the sand - especially if the sand contains old mining toxins.

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became Sean Combs fans last week.

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The Denver Post's opinion is expressed in this column alone.

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